



## **Venerable Ringu Tulku Rinpoche**

### **Living and Dying in Peace & with Dignity**

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I am very happy to be back in Münster this year and to see some of my old friends again. Thank you very much for being with me. The subject of this year's seminar is *Living and Dying in Peace & with Dignity*.

Our main concern is to live peacefully, happily, and with dignity and to die peacefully, happily, and with dignity. I think these are everybody's main objectives and that every human endeavour is directed towards living and dying in a good way. Everybody who lives also dies. What will help one to live and die in a good way? I'm sure there are many different views on this.

Peace of mind is extremely important for everyone. But what does peace mean? Some people think that it means that nothing is happening, there are no disturbances, nothing exciting is taking place, everything is a bit boring, and there are no visitors. Once I discussed this topic with students who were making a brochure and I wanted to use the word "peace." Some of them argued, "No, no. You can't use that word, because it's too boring." I don't think it's like that. Peace doesn't necessarily mean that nothing is happening. Peace is being in a more natural state, free of disruptions, disturbances, turbulences, anxieties, and fear. It means being settled and therefore joyful. I don't think peace means being inactive, rather it means being in harmony and free of suffering, anxiety, and problematic situations. When talking about learning how to be at peace, it also means learning how to be happy and joyful and being satisfied and content. One isn't at peace when one isn't content. Then one's mind is not settled but is in need; one has a feeling of not being fulfilled. Peace is also the state of being fearless. One panics when one is fearful and then one's mind is totally disturbed, not settled,

not in harmony, unhappy. Peace very much has to do with being free of fear, anxiety, worries and being in harmony, settled, happy, joyous, satisfied. How can one get peace? Is there a way to get it or not? Does it mean getting things done and having lots of things or does one has to work on getting it within oneself? These are the basic questions.

Everything depends upon other things. Nothing in one's life is independent. Causes and effects prevail when things happen, but the main thing is to know that peace cannot be bought or acquired. One can buy property, e.g., a cottage in the forest, but peace is a state of mind and isn't something like land, a house, or goods. Of course, it might be very helpful to move to a quiet place, but that alone will not suffice to have peace of mind. From the spiritual point of view, especially from the Buddhist point of view, peace is something one needs to develop and cultivate within oneself. Outer things are contributory factors, but peace within is much more important than anything else. Let's take the example of fear: When one is fearful, one is afraid of something, e.g., a ghost, change, sickness, etc. Not being sick or nor meeting a ghost, for example, don't mean that one is free of being afraid of them and therefore one cannot run away from one's fear that one might encounter them. Fear isn't something one can get rid of easily.

One has to look at one's life and mind now, see how peaceful one is, whether one has any fear, whether one is anxious. One has to see how one's state of mind is, how much joy and happiness one has, how harmonious one's mind and life are. I think it's very important to look at oneself and really see. Having little or not much peace, stability, and joy mean that one's mind is disturbed and that there is something one wants and needs to change and develop. I think it's important to think about this.

I'm going to speak about living first, because one has to learn to live peacefully in order to be able to die peacefully. One can't die peacefully if one doesn't know how to live peacefully, so it's most important to live peacefully, which means happily, joyfully, fearlessly, and in harmony with oneself and the world.

Is it possible to do away with and get rid of everything that disturbs one's mind? It would be very difficult, actually impossible, because one would have to change the whole world. One would have to be able to control everything so that nothing disturbing and unfortunate happens, e.g., one would have to stop all cars so that there is no noise while one is meditating, one would have to stop everybody from doing something that one doesn't like, one would have to make everybody do things that one wants, and so forth. It's impossible to change the whole world and every living being. What's the option so that one can find peace? The only option is to change oneself. One must find a way so that all those things that one thinks are disturbing, frightening, and make one unhappy don't occur. That's the only choice one has and it's the only way.

Most spiritual paths speak about a way to train and transform one's way of experiencing so that one isn't disturbed by what one considers disturbing and can be peaceful and joyful instead. Buddhism is almost completely about this. Buddhism is not a set of beliefs but is a training on how to transform one's way of experiencing things into peace, joy, and happiness. This doesn't refer to excited happiness but peaceful happiness, joyful happiness.

One's experiences depend on whether one considers something one experienced as bad or not so bad. Things or incidents depend on how one sees, experiences, and reacts to them, i.e., on how one is affected by them rather than how they actually are. If one finds a way of seeing

things and incidents in a positive way, in a way that isn't disturbing, then they don't become causes of disturbances, problems, or suffering.

From the Buddhist point of view, the main understanding is that one's true mind or consciousness is not bereft of peace, i.e., the natural state of one's mind is peaceful, joyful, clear, creative, and kind. But, one is disturbed and affected when one doesn't experience one's mind's natural state. That is the main contention in Buddhism, that one's mind has the natural quality of being in peace and joy and disturbances are not its authentic and true state. Disturbances are like pollution that can be dispelled. Lord Buddha gave an example and asked his disciples, "What is the natural quality of water?" He told them, "The nature of water is pure and clear and its characteristic is that it quenches thirst. Its true nature is not polluted and it can become clean again when the dirt that has polluted it has been dispelled."

There is a story from Lord Buddha's life. It is said that he was sitting with his many disciples along the banks of the Ganges River and offering them teachings. At a certain point, he asked them to fetch water from the river and to bring it to him. They did as he requested and he asked them, "Is the water clean? Can one drink it?" They answered, "No, it's not clean. One can't drink it, because sand and mud are floating in it." He told them to put the earthen pot filled with the dirty water on the ground and to leave it undisturbed for a while. After a few hours had passed, he told them, "Now look at the water and see how it is." They looked and saw that it was clean and told the Buddha, "Now it is clean. The dirt and sand have settled to the bottom of the pot." The Buddha asked them, "How can this be?" The Buddha continued speaking to his disciples and said, "The nature of water is clean and pure. Dirt got mixed with the water because it was turbulent and therefore it can separate from the water when it is left alone. Our mind is like that, too. It becomes peaceful and clear when it is settled. That is the main training of meditation."

This is the understanding: The natural state and quality of our mind is like clean water that is not disturbed. The natural state of our mind is awareness, peaceful, and joyful. When it is disturbed by all sorts of emotions, fear, problems, and pain, then it becomes like murky water. When one allows one's mind to settle and be in its natural state, then its innate qualities manifest. One's mind's natural qualities are peace, joy, kindness, creativity, and so forth. They are the natural state of one's mind and only need to be awakened. If one can awaken the natural state of one's mind in a deep way, then one can experience tremendous natural peace and joy. Peace and joy are not needs that require anything in order to manifest, since they are innate qualities of one's mind that are concealed by superfluous wants and needs. One of the main ways of working to bring peace and joy into one's life is meditation practice.

Meditation is a very important factor in experiencing one's true nature. Changing how one sees, feels, and experiences oneself and things around is paramount to Buddhism. Letting one's mind become calm and clear through meditation takes lots of time, but changing one's attitude and way of seeing things can be accomplished very quickly. Therefore, from the Buddhist point of view, it's very important to look at things in a direct, clear, and complete way. Training in that is called "training in the view," i.e., training the way one sees things. Ascertaining the view changes one's attitude.

Most problems are born from the way one sees things. One only looks at things in a certain way, from one angle, and reacts in reliance on that vantage point. Then one has many problems. One can see things in a different light, more clearly and fully, if one can look in another way.

Many things depend on one's expectations. Let's say that I expect that everything has to be perfect for me, e.g., I expect that I have to be the most attractive person, that whatever I want must be accomplished, that everybody has to appreciate me and be happy in my company, that everybody has to applaud anything I do. What happens if I have such high expectations? Even if I am really good and everything is nice, I'm unhappy. I see this in people very often and clearly. In prosperous countries, where everybody has good opportunities, people are very demanding on themselves and many of them are totally unhappy; sometimes they even say, "I hate myself." In less prosperous countries, where people don't have many opportunities, I never hear anybody say, "I hate myself." Sometimes they live under most difficult conditions, are impoverished, go through so many hardships, and hardly have any chances to be successful in their lives, but they are very happy. When one looks deeply, expectations cause the problem. One is disappointed when things don't turn out the way one expected and then one thinks, "I'm no good." If one doesn't have far-flung expectations and things turn out nicely, then one is more than happy and feels delighted. So, I think it's very important to look at how one sees oneself and what expectations one has. It's not about what one has, but about how one looks at things and what one expects. It makes a huge difference seeing clearly.

Furthermore, one's actions of body and speech are very important. Of course, one's actions depend very much on how one sees things and on one's state of mind. One's body, speech, and mind are habituated to thinking and acting in a specific way. Creating situations, they affect one and others deeply. I see that most people have the habit of focusing their attention on their own problems. They can be big or small problems, e.g., being worried whether one's shirt matches one's shoes or whether one's watch is working right. If one thinks that something is a problem, it is a problem and one concentrates on it fully. One isn't at peace, isn't happy, and is in trouble as long as a problem one believes in isn't solved. One has the habit of thinking that one has to solve a problem and thinks that one will be very happy when one succeeds, but it doesn't happen like that. After one problem has been solved, another problem arises, maybe bigger than the last. Maybe two problems will arise after that one is solved. When will one be happy while focusing on problems? There's no time - there's problem after problem after problem instead. Many people always have problems and are always unhappy, not because they don't have and experience wonderful and nice things, but because they are so used to just focusing their attention on problems and thus never experience all the good things. They even know that this is the case and tell themselves, "I should not focus on negative problems. I should focus on positive things, but ..." It just comes up. One's mind gives the orders and one's body and speech follow by acting out the orders, which become habits.

The three most important areas of training on the path are step-by-step working on the view, meditation, and actions so that they become positive habits. By working on them persistently, one can bring about a peaceful state of mind. Integrating the practices in one's life, without forgetting them, is the most important point. Dharma isn't a matter of getting information, which is also necessary, but it's a matter of putting what one has learned into practice, otherwise nothing changes. Sometimes people receive many teachings, read many books, collect lots of information, and know all kinds of meditation practices. They don't change but stay exactly as before, if not worse. Why is this so? Because they didn't integrate their understanding and practices in their lives and don't live it. Then nothing changed or changes. That's why it's said that it can be enough to transform oneself if one only understands a fraction of the teachings and makes use of them.

There is an interesting story of a Bhutanese lady who lived recently. She was married and had 5 children. She left home to meditate in a cave and recited the short practice, *The Praise of*

*Twenty-One Taras.* She didn't know it very well and made a few mistakes. Local people brought her food for many years. One day she told her sponsors, "Please don't come for 7 days." They thought that she was going on a short trip. They returned after 7 days to give her food and found her door locked. They broke the door open and saw that she had gone into the rainbow body; only her hair, nails, and clothes were left, nothing else. When people later passed by her cave, they could hear her voice singing *The Praise*, but in the wrong way. Even though she had made mistakes, she practiced well and attained the rainbow body. This shows that if one understands the three ways of training and really practices, then one can have peace and live and die with dignity. If you have any questions, you are most welcome to ask. The more stupid the question, the more I like it.

### Questions & Answers

*Question:* "I'm very moved by what you said about expectations, that we have such high expectations and suffer as a result. Why do we have such high expectations?"

*RTR:* I don't know. Sometimes it's like this: When it's said that living in a democratic country gives everyone equal opportunities, one thinks that one is equal to the best. If one then sees someone who is better off or the best, one thinks, "I must be like that because I am equal." I think that many expectations come from this way of seeing, but then I don't know.

*Next question:* "If I made a mistake toward another person, is it enough to apologize if I think it wasn't good?"

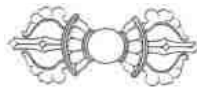
*RTR:* I think it's very good to apologize. You don't lose anything if you accept that what you did was wrong and say, "Sorry." You gain the good-will of the other person by apologizing. Even if you didn't do something wrong but hurt someone due to misunderstandings or other reasons, I think it's good to apologize, because one will win the other's good-will, the negative relationship is changed, that person feels better, you also feel better, and there are no hard feelings. I think it's very good. Many people find it hard to apologize, especially if they think they didn't do something wrong. Even if one did something small wrong, one always thinks it's somebody else's fault – you know, one hand cannot clap. I think it's good to apologize. It's not a question of whether it's enough. Good is good. If one can do something good on top of that, it's better. If one can do even more good, it's even better.

*Next question:* "You spoke about expectations. How can one actually develop if one doesn't have expectations?"

*RTR:* There is a difference between expectations and visions or aspirations. Vision or aspiration is the object of an aim, what one would like to see and knowing what is necessary to do so that one sees one's aim fulfilled. Having a vision or aspiration is very good. One needs to have aspirations, otherwise one cannot go forward. But aspirations are very different than expectations. Aspirations are directed towards what one would like, what one aims to achieve, and do not concern what one expects to have now. One must exactly know what one has and what one can expect of the moment in order to have a vision or aspiration. One cannot have a vision or aspiration if one expects that something must already be present. Aspiring means knowing that one hasn't achieved one's aim, learning and knowing what is necessary to do, and working at it. I think they are very different.

Sometimes people say that one can't be ambitious if one is content, which is wrong. Contentment means being satisfied with one's present situation, acknowledging and appreciating what one is and has. This doesn't imply that one doesn't want to improve things, but it means one isn't unhappy. Actually, the happier and more optimistic one is, the more one is able to progress. Being discontent and complaining, "This isn't good. That isn't good," etc.

is being negative and stops oneself from improving. I think it's very important to understand this. It's not that there aren't things that don't need to be improved, rather contentment is a matter of being grateful and appreciative of the way things are.



I want to speak a little more detailed about how to bring peace into one's life by practicing meditation. Meditation is a training and consists of two parts. The first is training one's mind and making it do what one wants so that it becomes more pliant, i.e., to think when one wants to think and to settle when one wants to settle. One begins by making one's mind pliant and flexible through learning to relax.

Sometimes one tries to create a good environment to meditate, a place that is quiet and inspiring and where there are no disturbances. But meditation doesn't depend upon a quiet place. Actually, it's very difficult to find a totally quiet place. I built a retreat center in Sikkim that is surrounded by a forest; there are no roads nearby and one has to walk through the woods about 10 minutes to get there. One person who entered the first retreat complained that it was too loud, because the birds were making too much noise. Forests can be very noisy. Birds, crickets, frogs, and all sorts of animals live in forests. Sometimes it's noisier there than in the city, but the noise should not disturb one.

I found it very disturbing when I came to the West the first time, because it was so quiet. I arrived in Brussels in the winter and didn't hear birds, didn't hear anybody play loud music, or honk their car horns, or talk on the streets. The only noise I could hear was the smooth buzzing of cars, "ssshhhh," and ladies walking on sidewalks, making the sound with their high heels, "tack, tack, tack." After a long time I again heard the sound, "tack, tack, tack." It's not like that in India. There are many stray dogs everywhere in India that bark all night long. When one dog starts barking, another dog will bark, too. Then the jackals come out. Have you ever heard jackals communicate? Every jackal can make nine sounds at the same time, something like this, "öööiiiiuuuuuu ...". When one jackal howls, another one not too far away will howl, too. On top of that, there are yogis who stop in front of houses in the middle of the night and try to drive away negative forces by blowing on their long horns and reciting loud mantras. They wake everybody up, and then the dogs start barking again. This goes on all night. The yogis ring the doorbells after waking people up with their noise the next morning and ask for alms. It's never disturbing – it's very nice, especially when they blow their horns and wake one up. There's a difference between waking up in the morning or being jerked out of one's sleep in the middle of the night by loud noise.

Sometimes I don't even hear the dogs barking, because one isn't disturbed if one doesn't mind. Being disturbed doesn't depend on the noise but on how much one minds. It's okay if one accepts it. If one thinks, "It's really disturbing and isn't nice" or "When is that dog going to bite me?" then one is very upset when one hears something. There was a clock in my house that went off every hour and that everyone liked. Some people couldn't sleep, because the bird came out and sang. At midnight, it made the sound, "cuckoo, cuckoo, ..." 12 times. Let me tell this story: There was a big electric generator at a powerhouse in Kalimpong that never stopped rattling loudly. An officer who was newly posted in town went to a great deal of trouble to have it moved to the outskirts of town and thought that everyone would be appreciative, would come and congratulate him. But a few days after it was moved out of town, a huge delegation representing the citizens of Kalimpong looked him up and requested, "We cannot sleep anymore, because there's no more noise. Can you please bring back the

generator.” It happens like this, because of people’s habitual way of taking things and shows that being disturbed about something has nothing to do with an object but with one’s attitude. So, one has to change one’s way of reacting to things to make one’s mind peaceful, and the most important thing is to learn to relax.

One can train to relax one’s mind, which isn’t necessarily easy. Relaxing doesn’t mean closing one’s senses to forms, sounds, etc. by using earplugs, blindfolds, and nose plugs; they help for a while but aren’t solutions. One has to allow one’s mind to relax by letting it rest in one’s body together with one’s body. One doesn’t put oneself in a state of being deaf and dumb. It’s possible to close one’s senses to things by being very concentrated on something. I’m good at that, because I used to shut down to outer things a lot when I was young and had to study. My family didn’t live in a big house. Parents, aunts, uncles, six children, and a chicken shared the same room. The chicken used to sleep next to my pillow. Depending on how healthy a chicken is, it lays eggs for 6 or less weeks. Maybe you don’t know that when a chicken lays no more eggs, it brutes the laid ones day and night. So, she was sitting next to my head and the little chickens chirped when they hatched. That was nice and not disturbing at all. But the five children made so much noise. I had to switch off my hearing when I studied, otherwise I would have gone crazy. It was okay. So, it’s possible to do that.

The standard instructions on meditation are sitting down, bringing one’s mind into one’s body, and easing it. One sits down comfortably and relaxed and allows one’s mind to be in contact with one’s senses, i.e., one’s mind is in one’s body, not in one’s head or roaming around in the sky. Being in contact with one’s senses means being aware of the nowness and being in presence. Being in presence means seeing, hearing, feeling, experiencing whatever presents itself in the moment, again in the next moment and in the next moment. One doesn’t let one’s mind get lost in stories by following after sensations that one naturally has. One isn’t tense when one hears, sees, feels, and experiences things in the moment. One becomes tense and uptight when one thinks, for example, “Oh, that noise is just too much for me,” or “What I see isn’t good,” or “What I feel is really bad.” One follows one’s thoughts more and more, thinking, for example, “That’s really bad,” or “That’s really good,” or “That shouldn’t have been,” or “This should have been,” or “It was like this yesterday and will be like that tomorrow.” Not what is happening but all those thoughts cause one to be disturbed. Therefore, one lets go of whatever thoughts arise about what is happening. One lets go of what one sees, of what one hears, etc. and doesn’t hold on to anything. One hears, sees, tastes, smells, feels, and experiences things and relaxes.

When it is taught that one shouldn’t grasp at things, it means allowing whatever happens to happen. It means letting thoughts, emotions, sensations, perceptions happen and letting go while they cease. One doesn’t run after thoughts, e.g., thinking, “It should be like this,” or “I should experience it like this,” or “I shouldn’t experience it like this,” and so forth. It is nothing like that, rather whatever is, is and one lets it be. Having that understanding, attitude, and know-how is what is meant by being relaxed. One doesn’t have to try, one doesn’t have to make things happen, rather whatever is, is - one is within that. One doesn’t need to run after, away from, or fight with anything. One lets any negative emotion or positive thought arise and doesn’t grasp at it. It’s okay when a thought comes. It doesn’t matter if it’s a good or bad thought or sensation. That’s how things are - they come. One’s mind is very active and creative, so one lets it be. It has to be clear, creative, because that’s how it is.

If one feels sad, angry, or fearful, one doesn’t think, “Oh, I shouldn’t feel like that.” One just lets one’s thoughts and feelings come and one relaxes in that. Thoughts, emotions, and any kinds of feelings go if one doesn’t react to them. If one lets them come without being fearful

and without grasping at them, one's mind becomes very spacious and then things can come and dissolve on their own. They don't dissolve as long as one clings to them, though, and then one's mind becomes very turbulent. When one's mind is very spacious, then clouds that appear are not disturbing. If one doesn't hold on and doesn't pour fuel on thoughts that arise in one's mind, they dissolve into themselves. It's important to learn to let them be. It's not about investigating thoughts and emotions that arise, e.g., thinking, "Okay, now I have this feeling of sadness," or "Now I have this feeling of anger," or "Now I must do something about it." That only makes things increase. One looks and sees that things arise and dissolve in one's mind. Then they aren't a serious matter and don't leave a strong impression in one's mind. Once one knows how to do that, one becomes more confident in dealing with one's emotions.

The most important point of meditation is exercising in the described manner, training like that again and again. One allows what is to just be. Then one's mind is peaceful and in harmony with whatever arises, not only when one sits down to meditate but in daily life, too. Of course, it's easier while engaging in formal meditation practice, in which case one is in a nice place, is sitting comfortably, and has stopped anyone from calling.

One encounters many things in daily life: one has to deal with people, one has to solve problems, one has to live up to challenges, time-lines, and demands. If one can carry a little bit of being in the present moment and being aware of and clear about what is going on while involved with daily activities, then one isn't as caught up with mental speculations and imaginations. When one is under pressure and feels stressed, most of the time one loses track of what is really taking place in the present moment and gets lost in imaginations that one creates. A situation is already too difficult to handle if one thinks, "Oh, I have so much to do. How can I manage?" Maybe it's not that much, but one freezes due to panicking and being anxious. Then one can't really do what one is supposed to do and becomes inefficient. Instead of doing what one needs to do, one worries and panics. Even small things seem too much. One becomes very tired and feels exhausted when one is worried and anxious.

Whenever I was with His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a very big man, about 6 ft. tall, I always had the feeling that he wasn't doing anything. One could look him up whenever one wanted to and he was always free to help. Actually, he gave so many teachings, wrote books, wrote letters, guided pilgrims, performed pujas, imparted empowerments, and did 10 things at the same time. But when one looked at him, one had the feeling that he wasn't doing anything and he was never tired, not even when he was in his 70s and 80s. It is said that he got up at about 3:30 in the morning. I never saw this, but when I requested special teachings from him, he told me, "Yes, come over at 4:00 tomorrow morning." When I arrived, he was already busy doing many things. He gave me the teachings I had requested and told me to return at 10:00 or 11:00 at night. He even gave teachings when he was in the bathroom. I never saw him tired. I think that one's mind doesn't get tired if one doesn't feel disturbed. One feels exhausted and tired when one is fearful, anxious, and worried, even if one doesn't do anything. One is more tired when one has those feelings than when one actually does something, because it's the mind. If one can be relaxed in the present moment, I don't think that one can be worried and fearful.

Many Lamas were imprisoned, tortured, and killed during the Chinese invasion of Tibet. One man who escaped said that the situation in prison was like a test, that one could see who was spiritually advanced and who wasn't. It wasn't a problem for some people to be tortured terribly, beaten up brutally, and knowing that they were about to be killed; they were relaxed and even smiled. Those who could not practice were in a completely different state of mind.



This man reported that the worst torture was being tied up with a wet rope. The more the rope dried, the tighter it became and the deeper it then cut into the flesh. He also said that one wasn't allowed to go to the bathroom at night and that it was so painful. He told about a Lama he was in prison with and who he had asked, "Please, can't you do something?" The Lama said mantras, blew on his wounds, and the pain went away. After a while, this man was transferred to another cell. Sechen Rangjung Rinpoche, a great Lama, was in the same cell. This man noticed that they were giving Rangjung Rinpoche good food, weren't torturing him anymore, and he thought, "This is a bad sign." He knew that they would shoot imprisoned persons soon when they stopped torturing them. The man asked Rangjung Rinpoche, "From the way they are treating us, it seems we will be shot soon. What do you think we should do?" Rinpoche was at ease and replied, "I will leave very quickly anyway, but you will escape and will not die if you recite 100,000 Vajrakilaya mantras." The man wasn't very convinced, though. He said that two days later Rangjung Rinpoche had entered a deep meditative state and passed away. Then he thought that maybe what he had told him would help and started reciting the mantra. Eventually, he was ordered to work outside, was able to run away, and fled to India. I told this so that you understand that it's possible to allow one's mind not to be carried away by emotions but to remain in the present moment. It's possible to be happy, even in the most difficult situations. If one is a very good meditator, one can even determine the time of one's death and, like deciding to go on a picnic, one can leave when the time to leave has come. Rangjung Rinpoche passed away like that.

Something very strange happened at the end of the last Kagyü Mönlam in Bodhgaya. The Mönlam started on Dec. 14 and as usual lasted 7 days. Three more days were added in that year so that the Medicine Buddha practice could be done. When it was over at about 5:00 on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa gave a short talk and taught that people needed to be very aware of global warming and environmental issues. Everything finished very well at about 7 or 7:30 that evening. Behind the Great Stupa is an ancient cemetery and next to it, about 10 yards away, is a popular tea shop. There were many people having tea that evening. An old nun came, sat down on the ground near the cemetery, and did *Chöd* (the 'cutting through practice'). Flames came out of her body when she said PETH and then her body set on fire. Everybody was watching and some people cried, "Extinguish the fire with water." Others said, "No. She isn't disturbed. She is meditating." The fire was very strong and people took photos. Her body was totally burned in about 40 minutes and all the while she sat in meditation posture. Then nothing was left of her body and the police came and took the ashes away. I saw the photo when she was half burned and saw that the fire had really blazed. On the photo I could see the bones of her legs, because her flesh had burned and at that stage she was still sitting upright. The police investigated the incident, learned that she was an 86-year-old nun from Bhutan, and found 10,000 Bhutanese Rupees and her identity card in her bag, nothing else. They found that no chemicals had been used for her body to burn, and so she was able to burn by herself. I went to the spot where this happened the next morning; it was very small and the vegetation around was not even blackened or burned by the fire. I found ½ of a plastic shoe there and on a small stone a little locket with a photo of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa inside; the photo was only burned a bit on one side. It was a very strange incident and happened only a few months ago. This shows that the nun was perfectly free to die and to completely dispose her remains.

Let us do a short meditation together before continuing with a question and answer session. Josef said that *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche was recommended as reading material to participants of this seminar. If you have any questions concerning anything you read in this very good book, please ask.

## Questions & Answers

*Student:* “Did His Holiness the Karmapa or someone near him say anything about the nun who burned herself?”

*RTR:* No public statement was made, but His Holiness discussed it in private. In stories about Lord Buddha’s times and in the Sutras, it is mentioned that some great *Arhats* (‘foe destroyers’) disposed of their bodies after death without leaving any remains, like burning on its own. His Holiness said that it might have been such an incident. As far as I know about Tibetan saints, people tried to cremate Milarepa after he had died, but the fire would not burn. Before he died, Milarepa had asked Rechungpa to see him, but he arrived late because he got into trouble with girlfriends and things like that. When Rechungpa arrived, Milarepa’s body came back to life and Milarepa spoke to him. Afterwards, fire naturally blazed from Milarepa’s body and it burned. So this is the only story I know of this happening in Tibet.

*Next question:* “What can we do to support a friend or relation who is not a Buddhist and is dying?”

*RTR:* According to Buddhism, the first most important thing one can do to help a dying individual is to lessen their fear as much as possible. The second thing one can do is to help them focus their mind on something positive. That would be very, very good.

It would be most important for those persons who are near the dying to be kind and to help them reduce their fear by concentrating on something positive and not on problems and negative feelings. It would be very helpful and I think it’s very important to try to do something that makes the individual who is dying feel they are cared for and loved. I think everybody wants to be cared for and loved. Death is a journey and one has to go alone; nobody will go along. So, I think it’s very important to give loving support to the dying.

In Buddhism, the main thing is concentrating on something positive, so one tries to help the dying person think of what is most inspiring for them, like the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, or Lamas. The focus of one’s attention is most decisive at death, because it determines one’s future. There’s the story of a Tibetan man in Kham, who was a little bit of a cowboy. He was dying, so his friends called the Lama to help him die peacefully. The Lama came and said to the dying man, “Now you are about to die. Try to remember the Buddhas, or Buddha Amitabha, or the Lamas.” The man replied, “No, I can’t remember them. The Buddhas, Buddha Amitabha, the Lamas don’t come to my mind.” The Lama asked him, “What comes to your mind?” The man answered, “Seasoning sausages.” Those are the sausages that are heated by being laid in the hot ashes of a barbecue. The Lama responded, “That’s very good. Seasoning sausages grow on every tree in the Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha. All you have to do is open your mouth and they just fall from the branches into your mouth. Not only that, but Buddha Amitabha’s body is the color of ashes.” Then the dying man could think about this and was able to die a little bit more peacefully. That’s the attitude. It doesn’t matter too much what one thinks about as long as one focuses one’s mind on something positive.

Sometimes lots of negative thoughts arise while one is dying. One thinks about the past, what one did and did wrong and what people did and did wrong – all those things that don’t make sense. The point is focusing one’s mind on something positive. If somebody has a specific faith and believes in god or whatever, I think it would be good for them to focus their attention on whatever makes them feel confident. If one has no belief, then thinking about something positive and inspiring is very good when negative feelings come up. One man I heard about listened to the recordings of teachings that he had collected until he died. It’s said

again and again that this was very beneficial for him, because he didn't think about other things too much.

Fear is usually the worst emotion that arises when one is dying. Of course, one has to work on it now, because it's important in life, too. It's the biggest problem at death. One panics when one is fearful and then all sorts of negative thoughts and emotions take over. If one really thinks about it, though, then one realizes that there's no use being afraid. One is less fearful if one thinks about the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, a god, or positive things. If one doesn't believe in anything, then one has to go through whatever one has to go through anyway. Fear doesn't make things better and in fact is useless. Maybe what one has to go through isn't that difficult, but one has to go and fear doesn't help in any way. If there is life after – no problem; one takes a nice life after. If there's no life after – no problem; then there's no life after. So, what is there to be afraid of? One forgets many things when one becomes stuck in personal problems and then freezes. Sometimes it's very helpful if somebody reminds one of what really matters, because then one can see, "Oh yes. It's really like that. Actually, I already know this but forgot, because I became involved with emotional turmoil."

In the same way, it's useless being afraid of fear while alive. If one succumbs to fear, one is in panic and always thinks that something will go wrong. It's said that fear of death is the worst kind of fear and that being afraid of death is like dying every day. If one doesn't succumb to this fear, one lives. Of course, one will die one day – nobody lives forever, but one only dies once. Therefore it is said, "A coward dies every day. A courageous person only dies once." I think the attitude of trying to do one's best for the interest of oneself and others by seeing whatever one faces clearly leaves no room for fear and is a very important training for living and also for dying.

Sometimes one can help the living as well as the dying and the deceased. But one has to have been able to have helped oneself in order to be able to help others. There is extensive discussion in Buddhism on preparing oneself. If one has won understanding and is able to help oneself, then any help others might give helps quite a lot. It's sometimes very difficult to accept help if one isn't ready and able. In any case, one should do one's best to help people, but sometimes one can, sometimes one can't, sometimes one can help more, sometimes less. It's very important not to become discouraged, because any good one can do makes a difference, maybe not in the short run but in the long run. Sometimes small things make a big difference. I think one has to be very, very patient when dealing with things and never to become frustrated. One does what one can to the best of one's knowledge and abilities and can't do more.

*Next question:* "What can one do to die alone so that others aren't sad that one is dying and one doesn't feel ashamed of dying because one doesn't want them to feel negative?"

*RTR:* What is there to be ashamed of? Everybody has to die, so there's nothing to be ashamed of. But, if you don't want anybody else around at that time, then that's no problem. If that is your wish, it's not negative. Some people have this wish. For example, Milarepa sang in one of his songs, "If I can die in this cave without anybody coming in, without anybody going out, without anybody crying, then my wish will have been fulfilled." He didn't mean to say that he was ashamed of dying or that he didn't like people, rather he meant that he wanted to die in the cave he was in and didn't want to go somewhere else to meditate. He was satisfied and happy to be where he was. It's an individual matter. Some people like to do that. Especially great masters want to die in solitude, because they aren't attached to people and things and aren't in need of conversation or support. Ordinary people want to see people, want to have things or go places. If one feels that one has done what is necessary, that one has seen

everybody one wanted to see, and has meditated, then there are no problems to solve and one can die with dignity. It's good that way. The practice is to reflect and see how one would feel, whether it would be okay to die now or in the same night. One is a little prepared if one knows that it would be okay to die during the coming night.

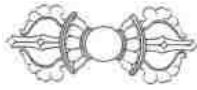
From the Buddhist point of view, there are the teachings on the four or six *bardos* ('the intermediate states'). It is regarded as very important to be aware of and train in the bardos, because every stage of the processes of bardo is an opportunity. Even death, not to mention life, is an opportunity. One can become fully liberated and can find the essence of happiness, joy, and peace in every stage of the process of dying as well as in the process of living. The bardo teachings are not about thinking things are finished, rather they concern knowing that now is the time to be aware, to use and work on the opportunity that one has, not to lose the chance to recognize one's true nature and become liberated from the cycle of problems, which is samsara. When one has that understanding and attitude, then one appreciates that every stage is an opportunity and nothing finishes at death. These teachings don't encourage pessimism, rather optimism. So, I think looking at and dealing with dying and death more positively are very important.

*Next question:* "How can one have positive thoughts if one sees that one is about to have a terrible car crash and realizes that one can't possibly live through it?"

*RTR:* People who had a serious accident and a near death experience had different experiences. They almost died and came out of that state. Much research has been done on this and it has been found that people make meaningful experiences, different than those they make in ordinary life, and they think they are very lucky to have survived. People have various experiences. Some people become traumatized, which is a kind of habit that one goes through. One went through a terrible and painful experience, which doesn't necessarily cause the trauma. Many people go through terrible experiences and get through them much stronger than they were before. Some people go through experiences that are less traumatizing and are more disturbed than they were before. It depends on how one looks at things afterwards. If one decides and tells oneself, "It was an extremely bad and painful experience. Thank goodness it's over and I'm out of it," then I don't think one is traumatized. One has let the past be past and is free in the present. If one thinks, "It was terrible! How could such a thing happen to me?" then one is holding on to the experience, doesn't let the past pass, and is traumatized. I think it's very difficult to let go of a trauma as long as one identifies with it. I think that society, friends, and associates might want to help but contribute a little bit to someone's trauma and intensify it by agreeing, "Oh, yes, yes. You went through such terrible things." The main thing is to allow the past to be the past and to let it be.

There are different practices taught in Buddhism to work on overcoming a trauma. It's said experiencing birth is not less traumatic than experiencing death, because it's not very pleasant to be born into this difficult world, I think. The practices to mentally go through the creation and dissolution phases are called "the creation and completion stage practices." In a way that isn't traumatic, one again and again practices going through birth and death through the creation and dissolution practices in a nice and positive way. These practices allow one to overcome one's trauma and not to associate as strongly with being born and dying.

Let me add that if a trauma has become central in somebody's life, I think it's more hysteria. If someone suffers from hysteria, it's necessary to shock that person by resorting to something that would otherwise bring on trauma so that they come out of their hysteria.



We talked about carrying one's meditation practice into daily life. Generally speaking, Dharma practice is all about understanding the best way to work on one's disturbed mind, one's negative emotions, one's problems, and things like that and becoming habituated to using one's insight in life as much as possible, even if just a little bit. It has an effect. That is the main practice. There are lots of different methods to work on this. I don't think it's really that difficult to know them. The difficulty is applying them. Then, it's not necessarily hard to apply the methods, but it's difficult really wanting to apply them, really using them. This is sometimes called "disciplining." Knowing what to do isn't difficult, but really practicing and integrating one's practice in one's life make the difference.

The meditation practice we went through is described very well in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. The 10<sup>th</sup> chapter is very important, because it teaches the highest kind of meditation, which is meditation on the nature of one's mind. It's called "*Dzogchen*" in the Nyingma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and isn't different from the Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra. It's a very profound meditation, because one practises to directly look at and directly experience the nature of one's mind. One can have a clearer understanding of what one's mind is all about if one can do that. Therefore, one will have a more practical understanding of one's thoughts and emotions and will know that one needn't be totally submerged in them. Then it's okay when thoughts and emotions come and go, because one can watch them arise out of one's basic mind and dissolve again.

Thoughts and emotions are like the radiance of one's mind and aren't really different than one's mind. Therefore, one needn't be afraid of or attached to them too much. It's okay to let them come; it's okay to let them go. There's no reason to be afraid, sad, or angry about whatever is there. I think the best example to illustrate this is one's shadow. If light shines on me, then my shadow is there. Do I have to be afraid of my shadow? No, I don't. Do I have to run away from my shadow? No, I don't and can't. Do I have to be attached to my shadow? No, there's no need. So, it's okay for my shadow to appear and it's okay if it doesn't. One should look at one's emotions in the same way.

Watching one's thoughts and emotions come and go doesn't mean that one shouldn't be sympathetic or doesn't need to have empathy for what goes on around one. It's important to be aware of the effects one's actions have on people and of one's reactions towards them. One needs to try to understand the feelings and consequences that one's actions have on others and how they affect one, too. One needs to try to act with compassion. When talking about positive actions, it really means to say doing things with the genuine motivation of compassion. Without harming oneself and others and helping to the best of one's knowledge and wisdom whenever one can, one creates peaceful and dignified circumstances and conditions that are nice for oneself and others.

Recently, someone showed me a paper that discussed very interesting research findings carried out by the Harvard School of Business. They found that most people are much more joyful when they spend money on others than on themselves. I think this makes sense. For example, let's say I had 5 Euros and bought myself a delicious ice cream. What happens? It was nice having the ice cream, unless it caused throat problems, which is another matter. Once I had the ice cream, it is finished and didn't give me happiness or satisfaction that lasted very long. After a short while or the next day, I want to have another ice cream. What would have happened if I had used the 5 Euros to help someone else? Then I would think, "Today I

gave 5 Euros to help someone else.” I think about it the next day or for the rest of my life and feel proud of myself. Happiness, joy, pride, and the good feeling of having done something for someone else remains with one, almost for the rest of one’s life, when remembering the situation. This is the difference: When one acts motivated by compassion and with the well-being of others in mind, then it’s not only good for others but is also very good for oneself, because it makes one very happy.

Thinking of and working for the welfare of other living beings is so good for oneself. If one keeps on thinking about others and works to benefit them, then one’s own problems diminish. In that case, one is busy thinking about what would be useful and helpful for others instead of thinking of oneself. Being preoccupied with oneself and only concerned about one’s own wants and needs become a problem. If one is concentrated on others’ problems and tries to solve them, then one’s own problems become smaller and often one doesn’t even feel them. Looking at one’s own problems causes one to be anxious, fearful, in pain, even depressed. Looking at others’ problems and contemplating how to help and benefit them brings joy. Inspired and motivated by compassion, trying to use one’s body, speech, and mind to help others is the Buddhist way. Furthermore, working on one’s mind by developing wisdom and practicing meditation are the way to bring peace and dignity to one’s life from the Buddhist point of view.

Many people think that they might become like a doormat if they have too much compassion or if they try to be too compassionate. I think this is a totally wrong way of seeing it. Compassion means being willing and making the conscious decision to put one’s knowledge of what is good for oneself and others in the short and long run into practice. It doesn’t mean one becomes submitted and loses control. It doesn’t mean one acts stupidly, rather acting with compassion is a clever, intelligent, and independent decision. It has to be like that, because one has to consider the best way to react and benefit others and one has to decide for oneself every time one does. Compassion doesn’t mean becoming a slave by doing what anyone asks one to do. That’s not necessary and isn’t compassion. It would be a little bit stupid, isn’t possible, and isn’t good for oneself and others either. Thinking like that would mean one has no rights and no freedom to decide what is best for oneself and others. Compassion means very clearly deciding for oneself what is best and what one is able to do. If someone asks for specific help, one has to think whether it is beneficial or not. If one sees that one can help someone, one is free to do so if one thinks that one can.

Compassion is having a benevolent attitude, i.e., wanting to benefit others and wishing that every living being has good things and is happy. It’s the opposite of being malevolent, i.e., wanting what is bad for others and disliking what is good and wholesome. The more benevolence one has, the happier one is. Newest discoveries in neuroscience show that the more individuals meditate compassion, then the section of the brain that registers fear is freer of fear and the happier those people are. There is a connection. One feels more valuable when one has compassion, because it is more becoming. Wishing everyone well is a positive and joyful wish. When one’s habit of wishing everyone well becomes stronger and stronger, one becomes happier, more joyful, and jollier. That kind of feeling is sometimes called “good-hearted.” His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says, “My religion is kindness. My religion is good-heartedness.” He is always talking about this.

It’s often understood and said in Buddhism, “It will be very good when the person who has a good heart dies.” This doesn’t mean to say that one is looking forward to someone’s death. Rather it means that people who have a good heart die well, because nothing negative is going on in their mind. Therefore, it’s very good to live good so that one can die good. Doing as

much as possible to be helpful and useful during life makes one more warm-hearted and therefore kinder, more positive, and more joyful. Then one can die the best death.

From the Buddhist point of view, it's no problem and is guaranteed that someone who has a good heart will die well. So, the best preparation for a good death and good rebirth are cultivating compassion and wisdom. On top of that, if one trains in working with one's emotions and on oneself, then that's it. From the Buddhist point of view, life and death are very much related. There's no difference between living one's life well and making preparations for death; they are more or less the same. It's a matter of becoming habituated to being kind, warm-hearted, and compassionate. Then one's habitual tendencies become more positive.

One's habitual tendencies, which are a deeper level of one's consciousness, are most important during life but also when one is dying and during one's after-death experiences. At that time, one's habitual tendencies become clearer. For instance, one is very conscious when one wakes up in the morning. While awake, one is on a very alert level of consciousness and therefore one can think and act with knowledge and understanding. While dreaming, one experiences a more subtle level of one's consciousness. From the Buddhist point of view, one isn't unconscious but is in a state of very subtle consciousness while in deep sleep. One's experiences are more habitual while one is dreaming. The understanding from the Buddhist point of view is that one is on the same level of the dream stage while going through what is called "bardo after death." Then more subtle levels of consciousness dominate one's experiences. If one has become accustomed to reacting with compassion in life, then that reaction becomes deeper and deeper and one will naturally react with compassion while in the bardo after death. One can react with more and more compassion when one becomes freer and freer of fear. Therefore, it would be very good to change one's way of experiencing things now and to cultivate benevolence.

In Buddhism, the explanation of the entire process of living and dying is divided into four bardos, *bar-do* being the Tibetan term for 'in-between, transition.' The four bardos connote that every living being is in a transitory cycle of life, dying, or after-death. Everything is transitory and changes continuously, so living beings are travellers. The entire cycle of being and becoming is included in the four bardos. The first is the bardo of life, which begins the moment one is born and lasts until one dies. The second bardo, that of dying, begins when one starts dying; it lasts until one stops breathing. From then onwards, the main understanding is that death isn't an end, because one's mind has many levels of consciousness. For instance, one is awake, one dreams, one has deep sleep. Life and death are similar and one's consciousness never stops. One goes into the deepest level of one's consciousness when one has died. At that stage, one isn't unconscious. If one can be aware of the most subtle level of one's consciousness at that time, then one can be aware of one's deepest, profoundest, most basic consciousness.

If one can be aware of the deepest level of one's consciousness while in deep sleep, then one will be able to be aware of it while dying. Practitioners who are able to be aware of their subtlest level of consciousness while in deep sleep can enter *samadhi*, the Sanskrit term for 'deep mental absorption,' when they die. Many people are able to remain in *samadhi* after they have died and their body doesn't decay during that time. Their bodies stay warm, sometimes for 3 days, sometimes for 7 days. A *Khenpo* (a 'distinguished scholar') from my monastery died in the Winter of 2005 in the district of Kardze, which is a day's journey away from my monastery. They tied his body on the roof of a jeep when they brought it back. It's so cold there at that time of year; everything freezes and becomes like solid rock in 5 minutes.

When they arrived at my monastery after driving all day, they saw that his body was warmer than that of the living. They cremated Khenpo after he came out of samadhi several days later. Many things happened on that occasion. Last year a *Khandro* died in Sikkim. She stayed in samadhi for 7 days; her body stayed warm during that time and didn't decay for 3 weeks. They cremated her body in a holy place in Sikkim and different kinds of rainbows appeared in the sky, even big and small round ones with various colors. The whole sky was filled with rainbows. Of course people took pictures and the newspapers reported about this.

This is the understanding: If one's meditation is so deep that one can remain aware even at that level of profound consciousness, it is the state of realizing the most subtle level of consciousness, *dharmakaya* or *dharmata*, 'suchness.' It's an awareness of Buddha nature that is completely free of any delusions or pollutions and is called "pristine awareness." One has attained enlightenment when one has recognized pristine awareness and then one has no more samsaric experiences, in which case one needs to run away from and after things. One truly experiences the way one's mind really is when one realizes pristine awareness. Therefore, death is regarded as one of the greatest opportunities, because it is said that if one can really be aware of and experience one's subtlest level of consciousness, then one can become a buddha. From then onwards, one has no problems when one's other consciousnesses arise, because one doesn't see any thoughts, emotions, and sensations as outside oneself but as the radiant display of one's pure consciousness. Confident that dying is the strongest opportunity, one makes preparations by practicing meditation now and asks other people or spiritual friends to remind one to remember one's practice when one dies.

Depending on one's stability of mind, one remains in the state of meditation for a shorter or longer period of time after one has died. People who don't have meditation experiences and whose mind is very unstable can't stay in that state. People who have meditation experiences and whose mind is stable can remain in that state for a long period of time. Slowly, from the subtlest to the more gross level of consciousness, experiences start to come up – light, rays, and all sorts of things. So, that is the bardo of dharmata that sets in when one comes out of the bardo of death

Coming out of the bardo of dharmata, one's mind becomes very active again and one experiences what is called "a mental body." It's a little bit like in a dream, when one has a body with all senses and one's more subtle consciousness is more dominating than the gross consciousness one has while awake in life. Dreams indicate one's subtle consciousness more clearly, e.g., one feels depression or traumatic experiences more clearly in dreams. When one enters the bardo of becoming, one remembers one's past very clearly, too. There are many descriptions. I think it might differ from person to person, but it is a transition from waking out of dharmata into taking birth by being conceived. There are also many opportunities during the bardo of becoming.

Someone who is very good at practicing what is called "dream yoga," which isn't easy, can control their dreams and see what is happening in other places. I met the friend of a very good retreat master who told me that once he was very worried about his parents in Tibet, because he hadn't received any news from them for a very long time and didn't know what to do, whether he should return to Tibet to help them. He asked the retreat master, who said, "Okay. Seeing you are really worried, I'll do dream yoga and see." That night, the retreat master did dream yoga and told the man the next morning, "Your father is doing this, your mother is doing that, and everything is fine." The man later found out that it was exactly as the retreat master had told him. It's said that one can use one's consciousness in a very controlled way and do things that one can't do in connection with one's body while dreaming. Similarly, in



the bardo of becoming, someone who is proficient, who has the right training, has stability, wisdom, and compassion can choose what kind of life they want to take and where they want to be born. To do this, one has to be free of fear, be very aware, and know how to control one's emotions, otherwise one is driven by one's emotions during that time.

### **Dedication**

Through this goodness may omniscience be attained  
and thereby may every enemy (mental defilement) be overcome.  
May beings be liberated from the ocean of samsara  
that is troubled by waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

By this virtue may I quickly attain the state of Guru Buddha and then  
lead every being without exception to that very state!  
May precious and supreme bodhicitta that has not been generated now be so,  
and may precious bodhicitta that has already been never decline, but continuously increase!

### **Long Life Prayer for Ringu Tulku, composed by H.H. the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje**

The most peaceful essence of clear light, arisen as the changeless form of illusion,  
free from any sign of age and decay, may he live forever as the Buddha of long life.



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